Iran hearing - Boroumand testimony

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Testimony: The Persecution of Muslims in Iran

“Advancing Religious Freedom and Related Human Rights in Iran: Strategies for an Effective U.S. Policy”

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“We have no power of our own; we never had any and we shall not have any in the future. Whatever we have comes from God, if there is a power it is God's power.”

—Ayatollah Khomeini, in the daily Ettela'at, January 22, 1982.

I am happy to be here today to testify about the situation of freedom of religion, with a focus on the rights of Muslims, Sufis, and women.

The goal of our organization, the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran (ABF), is to promote the culture of human rights and democracy in Iran. We are doing so through a website that includes an extensive library of human rights and democracy related documents and an online memorial dedicated to all those executed in Iran or assassinated by agents of the Iranian government.

The memorial includes all victims regardless of their political views, religious or ethnic affiliation, nationality, and regardless of the nature of the crime they have been accused of. By dedicating a page to each individual, we offer victims’ families a record that restores the denied dignity of a particular

loved one and underlines his or her human rights. At the same time, we document the enormous scale of these deaths.

Consistent Trends in Religious Persecution of Muslims

Following the 1979 revolution, Iran witnessed the creation of a theocratic state dominated by Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters, which led to the legal institutionalization of discrimination on a wide and systematic scale. In the years following the revolution, the new clerical leadership brutally silenced all voices of dissent, including those of many Shi’a clerics and religious scholars who rejected its unorthodox concept of a state dominated by religious leaders. Led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the new leadership imposed its own interpretation of Islam on the country and claimed legitimacy as the true and only representative of Iranian tradition and of Iranians’ views and aspirations.

Most of us are familiar with Iran’s recent history and with the discriminatory laws and practices that affect religious minorities and women. In today’s Iran, members of official religious minorities (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) are only tolerated citizens, with privileges rather than rights. Members of unrecognized religions (primarily Baha’is or Sufis) have been stripped of their rights and their places of worship. Sunni Muslims are unable to participate in the government or military forces. Many have been subject to arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, while thousands among them have been executed.

Such patterns of discrimination make affected populations particularly vulnerable in today’s Iranian context of heightened political violence. In the past two years, state executions have been at a record high. ABF has collected reports of more than 447 executions in 2007, mainly from state-approved media and other official sources inside Iran. We have also documented several hundred cases of Iranians reported to have died in “clashes” with security forces or as a result of excessive force used by them in the past two years. Areas inhabited by Sunnis have seen a comparatively high number of executions, and protests have broken out in provinces with large Sunni populations, such as Kurdistan, Baluchistan, Ahwaz, and Turkmensitan.

Sufis (Muslim mystics) have also been target of discrimination and violence. Soon after the revolution, members of various orders of Sufis were intimidated, assaulted, and arrested by pro-government clerics and vigilantes. Many places of worship around Iran were closed down. Since 2005, episodes of violence, often involving incitement to hatred by pro-government clerics, and takeovers of places where Sufis assemble to practice their religion, have been numerous and have targeted the Nematollahi and

Gonabadi Sufi orders. Amnesty International refers to printed attacks against Sufis in the national newspapers, notably Jomhouri-ye Eslami and Kayhan. In September 2005, an Islamic scholar in Qom, Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, reportedly called for a crackdown on Sufi groups, labelling them a “danger to Islam”. In February 2006, state television ran a video clip of the Nematollahi Sufi order and made statements about the group’s connections to foreign countries, calling them the “instruments of foreign powers”.

While law and practice favor Shi’a Muslims for participation in government, the army, and education, a very stringent selection process screens all Iranians, including Shi’a Muslims, and prevents access to employment by anyone whose past and present loyalty to the state’s official ideology cannot be established. In fact, after six years of research, using mostly official Islamic Republic sources, ABF’s still incomplete documentation shows that the majority of the Islamic Republic victims are practicing Muslims: Shi’as, themselves, often revolutionaries, whose understanding of their religion and tradition differed from that of Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters; Sunnis, who have protested their place as second-class citizens in the Islamic Republic; as well as Sufis, whose mystical practice of Islam is attracting many Iranians repulsed by the violence carried out in the name of Islam.

Victims also include members of political groups, some opposed to the Islamic Republic and some not, men and women who were born in Muslim families and had become unbelievers or atheists. Hundreds of them were hanged as apostates during the secret prison massacre of 1988, punished for refusing to recant their unbelief. Today, no Iranian Muslim can declare himself an unbeliever, and the parliament is considering a law formally including apostasy in the criminal code.

Shi’a clerics who stray from the official theology have also been severely sanctioned. Ayatollah Montazeri, in spite of his impeccable revolutionary credentials, has been under house arrest in Qom since the late 1980s. In 1999, Hojatoleslam Mohsen Saidzadeh was arrested and convicted for promoting an interpretation of Islam in which women and men have equal rights. The court banned him from performing any clerical activity for five years. Most recently, Ayatollah Boroujerdi, a Shi’a cleric who openly promotes the separation of religion and state and claims to represent traditional Islam, has been imprisoned, reportedly tortured, and tried without access to an attorney. In June 2007, he was sentenced to death by the Special Court for Clergy.

Victims as Muslims, and as Women

The Islamicization of Iranian laws has been contested by many over time,

but the stakes have been particularly high for one group: women. The Islamic Republic has disadvantaged women in systematic ways, relegating them to the status of second-class citizens under the law. Women have been targeted for their dress and conduct and have been exposed to violence outside, as well as inside, their homes. Their rights within the family have been legally curtailed, and their value as human beings is now estimated as half of that of men, as is the value of their testimony. Women’s participation in the country’s politics and administration, as well as in the work force, has been limited by law. The religious legitimacy of these laws has been debated in Iran since the revolution and questioned by reformist clerics who did not consider the veil mandatory, for example, as a requirement for practicing Muslims.

Women from diverse social and political backgrounds have consistently advocated for legal reform and equality under the law. They have faced intimidation, harassment, beating, arbitrary arrest, and imprisonment (Mehrangiz Kar, Noushine Ahmadi, and Parvin Ardalan for example). Since 2006, those involved with the One Million Signature Campaign, which calls for the elimination of discriminatory laws, have been particularly targeted. Many among them have been arrested while collecting signatures in the streets and public places (Activists Fatemeh Goftari, Ronak Safarzadeh, and Hana Abdi, for example, have been detained in Kurdistan for months.)

A closer look at the pattern of repression against civil society in Iran shows many similarities and reveals a constant government concern not only to silence those voices among Iranians that question the legitimacy and relevance of the fundamental tenets of the official ideology, but to prevent the proponents of change to share information with the outside world. Understanding this pattern is a necessary step in any successful policy.

Memory, Truth, and Policy

The fact that we are gathered here today to talk and think about advancing the cause of religious freedom in Iran is a hopeful sign. From a human rights standpoint, religious persecution, whatever the justification, is unacceptable. When considering policy options that might effectively influence the state of religious freedom in Iran, it is of the essence to understand the underlying reasons for religious repression, many dating back to the inception of the Islamic Republic. The leaders of today’s Iran are aware of the lack of doctrinal religious legitimacy for their political power claims, hence the chronic nature of the regime’s violent persecution of religious dissenters.

Across three decades, images of hundreds

of thousands of demonstrators calling for an Islamic Republic, of armed revolutionaries and angry students taking hostages, and of young boys running over mine fields in the war with Iraq, have created -- in the West, and in the United States in particular -- the illusion of a people in harmony with the country’s new leaders: eager to see the establishment of a theocracy and determined to sustain it. But the reality of the Iranian revolution, as is the case with all major upheavals, was more complex than what is remembered today.

How many of us remember the Iranian civil society’s efforts to reverse the instauration of a theocratic regime? Can we recall the strength of the opposition at the time, including that of influential Shi’a and Sunni clerics, to the very concept of an “Islamic Republic?” We are bereft of memories of the crucial debate and the murderous tension during the drafting of a Constitution that provided extraordinary powers to a religious leader, transformed Iran into a totalitarian state, and deprived millions of Iranians, including Baha’is, Christians, Jews, dissenting Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, Sufis, Zoroastrians, and non-believers from participating in the politics and the administration of their country.

The circumstances surrounding the drafting and passing of the Constitution is crucial for the understanding of the scope of the religious repression at the time where the Islamic Republic’s leaders established themselves as legitimate representatives of Iranians. The seizure of the U.S. embassy took place at a time when Ayatollah Khomeini and his allies had not yet consolidated their regime. As the Assembly of Experts, a body contested even by Iranian revolutionaries, was drafting the Constitution, concern and stated opposition increased among religious and moderate secular groups, as well as among the Marxist-Leninist left.

Grand Ayatollah Shariat Madari, an influencial and prestigious cleric, opposed the concept of Velayat-e Faqih [Guardianship of the Jurisprudent, the political absolute power Khomeini claimed for himself, and which is the corner stone of the Islamic Republic's Constitution] as did the Grand Ayatollahs Kho’i, Qomi, Ayatollahs Baha’ al-Din Mahallati, Sadeq Ruhani, Ahmad Zanjani, Ali Tehrani, and Morteza Ha’eri Yazdi. Shari’at Madari was defrocked and put under house arrest. Over the years, many other clerics have been arrested, banned from seminaries, defrocked, and accused of harming the image of Islam by a Special Clerical Court that stands outside of the legal framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as it is not provided for by any legislation.

The concern was much more pronounced among ethnic and religious minorities, and open rebellions broke out in sensitive border regions populated by Kurds and Azeris. There were reports of widespread boycott of the referendum in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Baluchistan, and the South. The French newspaper Le Monde reported that polling stations, except a few, were empty in Tehran, while in Tukmenistan, crowds of angry Turkmens took over the stations and destroyed the ballot boxes.

It is true that many Iranians voted in the first referendum, to support the creation of the Islamic Republic. It is also true that they were only given to choose between a monarchy and an Islamic Republic that had not been represented with either a constitution or a program.

In 1979 and 1980, Iranian civil society’s fought to prevent the passing of laws and regulations that they deemed undemocratic, discriminatory, and repressive. The powerful images of an Ayatollah waiving at an impressive and mesmerized crowd erased the other reality: that of judges, lawyers, intellectuals, rights activists, politicians, clerics, and ordinary Iranians intimidated, imprisoned, sometimes stabbed in the streets and, in all circumstances, accused of being monarchists or tools of foreign powers.

What we often remember of those days are images of veiled revolutionary women, but we did not see those Islamist militants who terrorized, assaulted, and injured with razors or acid those women who refused to wear the veil. We saw women demonstrating against the Shah, but we did not see the thousands of men and women who demonstrated against the mandatory veil and protested the replacement of one the most progressive family laws in the region. Those images also erased a decades-old reality, that of veiled and unveiled Iranian women peacefully coexisting throughout Iran: in the workplace, in universities, and in families.

The aggressiveness of the newly established Islamic Republic and the ensuing censorship blurred the vision of most observers and deprived the Iranian civil society from a much-needed visibility and support. At the same time, in the West, short-term pragmatism drove too many of those interested in Iran not to look beyond the official discourse. The consequences for religious freedom in Iran have been drastic and tragic, yet they need not have been.

Let us be long-term pragmatists, keep the human rights in Iran as a relevant indicator of the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy, and include in all policy discussions the demands of those dissenters who, in spite of the chronic crack down on civil society, insist on the universality of human rights, including the right to have and practice a religion, to change one’s religion, or not to partake of religion, at all.

On

13 February 2006, hundreds of demonstrators were injured and around 1,200 were arrested when police and the Hojatieh and Fatemiyon groups (organized pro-government groups) violently suppressed a peaceful demonstration held by the Nematollahi Sufi to protest against an order to evacuate the community's place of worship- known as a Hosseiniye. The Hosseiniye was later demolished. According to reports, those arrested were then detained at Fajr prison in Qom, where some were tortured in an attempt to force them to sign pre-prepared false confessions claiming that the protest held by the Sufi group had political motivations and links to anti-government groups (for further information please see Iran: urgent investigation required into security forces violence against Sufi Muslims in Qom (AI Index MDE 13/016/2006, 17 February 2006).

Amnesty
International report to the 91st session of the International Labour Conference (3 - 19 June 2003): “The scope of those subject to the gozinesh process is set out in The Continuation [of the] Law of the Law on The Selection [gozinesh] of Teachers and Employees in Education and Development.
It states in Article 1 that the law is applicable to: ‘...the totality of ministries, state organizations, firms and companies; the national companies for oil and gas and petrochemicals; the Organization for the Propagation and Rebuilding of Industry; the Red Crescent Society; municipalities; the social security organization; […] firms and companies for which all or a portion of their budget is secured by public [state] funds…’ and others.

The Law on The Selection [gozinesh] of Teachers and Employees in Education and Development states, in Article 2, that “the general guidelines for the moral, belief and political selection [gozinesh]”of [applicants] is according to the following criteria:

- Belief in Islam or one of the official religions set out in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran;

- Practical engagement in the laws of Islam;

- Belief and engagement in the Velayat-e Faqih [or Leadership by a religious jurisprudent]; the state order (nezam) of the Islamic Republic and the constitution;

- Absence of a reputation of moral corruption and a tendency towards sin; …

- Absence of a record of an organizational membership or support of parties, organizations and groups declared illegal by the competent authorities; or the expression of repentance of this;

- …

See ICJ, http://www.icj.org/news.php3?id_article=2685&lang=en

See Federation Internationale des Droits de l’Homme, http://www.fidh.org/spip.php?article3400, and Amnesty International March 30, MDE 13/040/2007.

See the Islamic Republic’s Penal Code, http://www.abfiran.org/english/document-139-621.php

For
example, the level of participation in the parliament dropped from 7%
to 1.5 immediately after the revolution and up to 4.1% in 2003.
Unpublished Background Paper on women in Iranian civil law. Women’s
Rights Division of Human Rights Watch

Site for the One Million Signature Campaign: http://www.wechange.info/english/. See also,
http://www.wechange.info/english/spip.php?article210

Amir Arjomand, S. The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 156.